

Alicja Kędziora – The letters of Helena Modjeska and Sir Henry Irving



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Prezentowana korespondencja obejmuje listy Heleny Modrzejewskiej (1840–1909) do Henry’ego Irvinga (1838–1905) w latach 1880–1900.

Korespondencja jest tematycznie różnorodna, w większości została napisana w czasie pobytu i gościnnych występów aktorki w angielskiej stolicy (1880–1882, 1885) i jest świadectwem roli towarzyskiej, społecznej i zawodowej, jaką Modrzejewska odgrywała w ówczesnym Londynie. Zarazem publikowane tutaj listy są najwierniejszym, bo najszczerzym, odzwierciedleniem relacji, jakie zachodziły w arystokratycznym i artystycznym europejskim świecie końca XIX wieku.

The presented correspondence includes the letters of Helena Modjeska (1840–1909) to Henry Irving (1838–1905) from 1880 to 1900. The correspondence is thematically varied and was written mostly during the actress’ stay and guest performances in the capital of England (1880–1882, 1885) and is a testimony of a social and professional role, which Helena Modjeska played in the London of that time. The published letters are also the most faithful (because the most honest) portrayal of the relations occurring in the aristocratic and artistic European life at the end of the 19th century.

Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska) (1840–1909) saw Henry Irving (1838–1905) for the first time in June 1878. The Actress stayed at that time in London for a

few days, in transit between New York and Paris, on the way to Cracow. Because at that time she had already been entertaining an idea of playing on British scenes, she turned her first steps to the most popular theater playing William Shakespeare's plays – The Lyceum, where Henry Irving was a leading actor. The actor, who was unaware, that one of the greatest Shakespearean actresses looked at him, created at that time the eponymous character of Van der Decken from a new introduced to the repertoire play written by W. G. Willis and P. Fitzgerald for the repertoire of The Lyceum. After years, Modjeska wrote in her memories: it brought back to my mind the enchanting fairy-stories which had delighted my childhood. Irving himself appeared to me weird and unreal, like the story, and this Lack of realism, together with the actor's artistic appearance, appealed to me strongly. When he stepped out of the picture-frame, the illusion was perfect, and he truly gave one the impression of a supernatural being (Modjeska 1910: 367).

It had been two years before they met for first time (Modjeska 1910: 405), what took place after Helena Modjeska's debut (1 V 1880) at the Court Theatre. She chose for this performance an adaptation of Alexander Dumas's The Lady of the Camillas written by James Mortimer and named Heartsease. The day after the performance, an unknown man with a bouquet of white flowers was waiting for Modjeska in front of the entrance to the theatre. He welcomed her and handed her the flowers and an invitation to an evening performance of Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice at the Lyceum.

The acquaintance established in that way, originally shy and distrustful over time turned into a deep friendship, which lived through years. It was a friendship of a special kind, because it was based not only on common sympathy, but also on mutual respect for their work. Both, the greatest Shakespeareans of the epoch, cultivated the Shakespeare's art in many ways, and although they did not agree with each other's opinions, they hold meaningful appreciation of it, watched each other's performances greedily[1] and spent hours discussing (see: Korespondencja 2000: 70–71). They did not stop this custom even after Modjeska's departure from London and they always maintained it when they only had an opportunity to that (Korespondencja 2000: 111).

19. century was a period, when epistolary art flourished, so it is not unusual that both artists left many letters. The found collections[2] of the correspondences contain more than 1200 letters of Modjeska and her husband – Karol Chłapowski [Korespondencja 1965, vol. I, II; Lyra 1972; Korespondencja 2000; Kędziora 2009, I; Kędziora 2009, II; Kencki, Kędziora 2010; Nieznana korespondencja 2010; Taborski 2010; Kędziora 2011], and over 40 000 Irving's letters

(<http://www.henryirving.co.uk/correspondence.php>). Such a jarring disparity probably stems from international character of Madame's art, she played in many countries: Poland, America, Canada, England, Ireland, Czech Republic, an ostensible devastation of large amount of Chłapowskis' correspondence by their gardener[3] as well as war turmoil. Chłapowskis many times changed the domicile, often leaving or simply throwing away more unnecessary things. Whereas Irving spent almost all of life in London, setting off only few times for tournées to America[4], and what is more – found during his life a place and people who responsibly took care of his legacy.[5]

Because of the popularity of this kind of communication, the letters constitute now the most complete and the most accurate appearance of the artist's life. Correspondence not only supplements, explains or brightens the facts of their life, but most of all introduces new, completely unknown information, what changes the present image of the actors. In addition, the correspondence's language is a language of the epoch, what shows in a sincerely way the truth about ages and people living there, much more than written at the end of life memories, which are not free off intentional and unintentional self creation. The tone of the presented letters sometimes gives an account of correspondent's relations in a more distinct and convincing way than their content. Because it points out not only the friendship and mutual fascination, but also some distance, so typical to, especially English, aristocrats' circles. [6] The distance, which is very hard to find among American friends of Modjeska, for example the eminent poet Henry Wodsworth Longfellow (see: Lyra 1972: 325–326).

Both Modjeska's and Irving's letters are scattered over dozens archives, libraries and private collections in many countries. Presented in this publication correspondence comes from Victoria & Albert Museum, London and it is a unique collection of the artists' letters, which we succeeded in finding. Single letters, the first Irving to Madame and the second Modjeska to the actor are in: University Library of Irvine, California, USA and Library of Leeds University, Leeds, Great Britain.

The Published letters, all written by Modjeska, date from 1880–1900 are thematically different and were sent in mostly (except the letter nr 9) from London to... London, where it covered only few streets. Not all of them have a date or a place of sending. In such situation, information contained not only in a the content of the letters, but also in the paper is very helpful. Possession of the own stationery, very often with printed address of a workplace or residence, what in case of such a short stay as Modjeska's in London is very important, because it significantly facilitates dating, bears testimony to prestige and social position. All the letters from Modjeska to Irving were

written on private writing paper; two of them have a printed address of Chłapowskis: 145 Sloane Street S. W. and their crest with a motto: Bonum ad ipisci[7], one – only the crest, rest of it – artist's monographs. Thanks to this correspondence, the place and date of Modjeska's living can be stipulated in the easiest and the most reliable way. By dint of the letters to Irving two addresses could be determined: 145 Sloane Street S. W. and Dover Street 26. The London stationery gives also additional information, because the found letters are so-called mourning letters (number 6 and 8), that is letters notifying the mourning of one of the correspondents. It is an old Victorian tradition, according to which the information about mourning is not embedded in a content of the letter, but in a black frame surrounding the edges of paper.

The letters arose in different times, their subject area is also varied and its content – multifaceted. Apart from the information given in a direct way on artists' acquaintances, meetings and organized performances, correspondences supply cultural context. The first of the presented letter confirms artists' fancy for photography, which in 80. of XIX century was still a young invention, but already established in actors' circles, used not only for the desire of preservation their image, but also promotion or documentation (in the case of photographs of a role) of the performances. The other letter (Nº 1) speaks about the custom of devoting one day in a week for receiving guests and about places particularly popular in that time (for example Prison Millbank).

The last two of the published letters written from outside London are typical letters with request for favoritism, which Modjeska wrote a few hundred (see: Szczublewski 1975: 607). The careers of her protégés were not all successful, some of them – for example Ignacy Jan Paderewski – shined brilliant blaze, others – as probably Vincent Sternroyd – never flashed. Certainly, it is not all Modjeska and Irving's correspondence, and the statement that it is its only modest representation seems to be authorized. But where is the rest? Probably it is hidden on dusty shelves of the archives, libraries, antique shops or it delights the eyes of private collectors. For the historians of theatre remains hope that it will be find someday.

26. Dover Street W. [London], 25 VI [1880]

Dear Mr. Irving

I took the liberty of giving my introducing card to Mr. W. Stuart[8] about whom I spoke with you at Mr. Alma Tadema[9] last Monday. He will call on you one of these days.

Mr. Stuart came to London with the intention to be engaged as an actor. He is also an indefatigable correspondent for the American newspapers, and will be able to give you the most satisfactory information about his country. I am sure you will be pleased with him. He was warmly introduced to me by my American friends and as a man „whom is well to know”.

I have another request. Do you remember you promised me to sign for me your photograph – I send you mine with my name, will you do the same for me? – Your picture I enclose is this I like the best, for it is thus I have seen you for the first time in my life[10].

Ah! Mr. Irving. I am afraid Mr. Pulitzer[11] in his rôle de brouillon[12] was the cause of a misunderstanding. I mean to speak about the Millbanks Prison[13]. I want you to believe, it would be the greatest pleasure to me and Mr. Chłapowski to be able to join you in that excursion. I only disliked very much Mr. Pulitzer’s invitation. Any day you will have time to go there and take us with you we shall be only too happy to do so. I am free the whole next week except Wednesday and Tuesday which is my reception day.

Dear me! You will think me a bore! Such a long letter – in such an English.

Forgive me, please – and believe me always

Faithfully yours

Helena Modjeska Chłapowska

145. Sloane Street S.W., [London, 1880?]

Dear Mr. Irving

Many thanks for letter afternoon came to us. It is like your goodness – I asked one boon of you and you accord me two! How shall I thank you for your portrait? You know how to make people happy. I feel so grateful

Devotedly Yours

Helena Modjeska

[London], Tuesday 26 X [1880]

Dear Mr. Irving

Mr. Barrett[14] told to me that you will honour us with your presence at his morning performance of Mary Stuart[15] tomorrow.

I do not need to add, it would make me very happy to see you in our small theatre[16] – however I shall not grumble if you do not come, I will simply think it a misfortune and have a good cry in the corner of my dressing room.

Your ever faithful admirer and friend

Helena Modjeska

[London], 4 I 1881

Dear Mr. Irving

How nice to join my voice to the numerous congratulations on your enormous success[17]. No one enjoys it more than I, and I will forward with impatience to an opportunity of seeing you in this new powerful character.

You will give us a matinee? Will you not?

I will not take your time by writing a long letter – I only wanted to tell you how happy I am to hear everybody singing your praise.

Believe me always your friend and admirer

Helena Modjeska

[London], Saturday [XII 1880–II 1881]

According to your wish we give a matinee[18] and I send you a box.

If you are bored blame your own kindness, for it was really very good of you to have said you wished to see that poor badly translated Adrianna[19].

I am yet indebted to you for your visit to our house[20] last Sunday. My rooms are still full of the pleasant recollections of your presence, and it is a great comfort to the imaginative person like myself. I fancy sometimes you are still here.

Forgive me my bad writing and believe always your devoted friend and admirer

Helena Modjeska

[1881?]

Dear Mr. Irving

Will you keep the photography I send you? I wish it may remained you sometimes of me. It is a very selfish wish, but I may be redeemed if I say that my only desire is to make you believe that wherever I am I shall always think of you us of great artist and dear friend to whom I owe numerous happy and beautiful hours of delight & admiration & also sublime moments of inspirations.

Many thanks dear Mr. Irving for all your goodness to me & adieu

Yours devotedly

Helena Modjeska

Mr. Bozenta sends his kind regards.

145. Sloan Street, [London], Friday [1880/1881?]

Dear Mr. Irving

I am obliged to trouble you again. By some accountable mistake Mrs. Broomley[21] who sent the invitations cards for our dinner put the date of 23rd instead of 30th.

Please accept my regrets and let me hope you will be disengaged on that date – the 30th.

We could not be happy without your presence.

I know you have no time to write, but I shall be near the Lyceum Theatre tomorrow afternoon and Mr. Stoker[22] can communicate to me your answer „yes” will be quite sufficious

Yours always

Helena Modjeska

145.Sloane Street. S.W. [London, after 1882]

Dear Mr. Irving

May I recommend your kindness Miss Herbert[23], who has been with me on the tour in the Provinces. She promise a great deal, but the opportunities for the young beginners are scarce in London. I am sure it would be a great boon for her if she could obtain the engagement at the Lyceum[24] – even at the smallest parts.

You must forgive me troubling you, but I take great interest in the career of Miss Herbert and I venture even the risk of being indiscrete in order to help her.

I hope you are quite well after your tour the triumphs and fatigues.

Your faithfully

Helena Modjeska

[1890?]

I take a great pleasure in introducing Mr. Vincent Sternroyd[25] who has been in my company two seasons[26], and always proved very satisfactory us well to the audiences as to the management.

His Lucio in Measure for Measure[27] and Claudio in Much ado about nothing[28] met with the unanimous approval of the New York press.
Yours sincerely

Helena Modjeska

[1900?]

Dear Sir Henry

I took the liberty of introducing to you Miss Benjamin[29] who represents two prominent papers of New York[30].

She is now on her way to St. Petersburg and Russian Poland and will stay a few days in London in order to see great city and write about it. She was so anxious to be presented to you that I could not refuse her this letter of introduction, besides, I am quite sure you will have no disappointment of meeting this most charming and clever person.

I take this opportunity of sending you and Miss Terry^[31] most cordial greetings and also Mr. Chłapowski's best regards

Yours faithfully

Helena Modjeska Chłapowska

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Illustrations:

1. Helena Modjeska (Modrzejewska) as „Mary Stuart” (Mary Stuart F. Schiller), London, 1880
 - 2.
 3. Henry Irving, private photograph, London
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[1] A custom of organizing the afternoon performances confirms it (see: letters № 3, 4, 5). Modjeska and Irving played almost each evening, so if they wanted to see each other, they had to organize a *matinée*.

[2] These collections include the letters of Modjeska and Irving as a recipient and as a sender.

[3]

[4] In: 1883, 1884, 1886, 1894–1895, 1895–1896, 1899–1900, 1901–1902, 1903–1904.

[5] The Garrick Club in London is in the possession of a huge Irving’s collection. Irving belonged to the club for many years, until the death (see: Hough 1986).

[6] Henry Irving was knighted at Windsor Castle by Queen Victoria on 18th July 1895.

[7]

[8] Probably Clinton Stuart – journalist, playwright, actor. Little is known about him. In 1882 he wrote a few very complimentary papers of Modjeska’s art (see: *Korespondencja* 2000: 78, 215). He was the author of the new version of *Marie Antoinette*. In summer 1899, he stayed in Arden, where he was to

rework his drama for Modjeska (see: Coleman 1969: 748–749 and Kędziora 2009: 175–176, I). It premiered on 5th September 1899 at the Fisher Opera Theatre in San Diego, CA. Maria Antoinette was the main role of the artists during her nineteenth tour.

[9] Lawrence Alma Tadema (1836–1912) – Dutch-born English classicist painter. He trained at the Royal Academy of Antwerp. One of the most renowned painters of the Victorian age. He became famous for his descriptions of the luxury and decadence of the Roman Empire. Modjeska wrote about him: It was my good fortune to meet this great artist and his wife at the beginning of my London engagement, and the happy hours spent in their hospitable home belong to my pleasantest memories of London [Modjeska 1910: 431].

[10] The first time Modjeska saw Henry Irving as Van der Decken at the play based on the Flying Dutchman story written by W. G. Willis and P. Fitzgerald in June 1878. The play premiered in London at the Lyceum Theatre on 8th June 1878.

[11] Pulitzer – there is no information about this person.

[12] Rôle de brouillon (fr.) – a role of troublemaker.

[13] Millbank Prison – penitentiary prison in Millbank, Pimlico, London. It was opened in 1816, used until 1886 and demolished in 1890. On the site was built the Tate Gallery in 1897. Prison was designed by William Williams for 1000 inmates and mostly used as a holding facility for people convicted of a crime who were transported to Australia.

[14] Wilson Barrett (1846–1904) – English actor, playwright and manager. In 1879 he took the management of the Court Theatre (today Royal Court Theatre, London), in 1881 – Princess Theatre (London). In 1880–1882 he cooperated with Helena Modjeska. Popular mostly thanks to roles in melodramas, even though he also played Shakespearean ones, Mercutio in Romeo and Juliet being a special success. He was successful as Wilfred Denver (H. Herman's The Silver King) and Marcus Superbus (W. Barrett's The Sign of the Cross).

[15] Mary Stuart premiered in Court Theatre on 9th October 1880. The play was written by Friedrich Schiller and adapted for Modjeska by Lewis Wingfield.

[16] The theatre on Lower George Street, off Sloane Square, was the converted Nonconformist Ranelagh Chapel, opened as a theatre in 1870 under

the name The New Chelsea Theatre. In 1871 under management of Marie Litton the interior of theatre was remodeled and the theatre was renamed the Court Theatre. It had a capacity of 728. The present building, designed by Walter Emden and Bertie Crewe, was built on the east side of Sloane Square and opened in 1888 as the New Court Theatre. Its capacity was 841 (including stalls, dress circle, amphitheatre, and gallery). The building was stopped used as a theatre in 1932, but he was used as a cinema until war damaged it in 1940. The theatre was re-opened in 1952 and it is used until today.

[17] The Cup written by Tennyson was performed for first time on 3rd 1881. Irving played a role of Synorix.

[18] Modjeska gave four matinees of Adrianna Lecouvreur Eugene Scribe and Ernest Legouvé at that time: on 22th December 1880, 23th January 1881, 12th and 26th February 1881.

[19] Adrianna Lecouvreur was translated and adapted by H. Herman.

[20] In London Modjeska and her husband lived at this time at Sloane Street 145, very close to the Court Theatre at Chelsea.

[21] Ida Broomley [Bromley] – a sister of Johnston Forbes-Robertson, Modjeska's leading man during first and second London's season (1880–1883). She was a close friend of Modjeska and Karol Chłapowski. For a period of time they lived in this same house at the Sloane Street 145.

[22] Bram Stoker (1847–1912) – an Irish novelist, personal assistant of Henry Irving, business manager of the Lyceum Theatre, and theatre critic. Best known for today for his novel Dracula (1897). He is an author inter alia of The Primrose Path (1875), The Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland (1879), The Snake's Pass (1890), The Lady of the Shroud (1909), The Lair of the White Worm (1911).

[23] Ethel Herbert – little is known about her. She played with Modjeska during her second tournée in an English cities from September 26 to December 1881 (Hull, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester, Glasgow, Edynburg, Leeds).

[24] The Lyceum operated in London's Wellington Street, in the City of Westminster, from 1765. Between 1809–1812, was rented by the Drury Lane company, whose building had burnt down. Rebuilt in 1818, it was renamed the English Opera House. After the fire of 1830, was again rebuilt in Wellington Street for both companies: the English Opera House and the Royal Lyceum. The dramatic troupe was managed by C. Kean, R. Keenley, C. Mathews, H. L.

Bateman, and others. It was Henry Irving who made it famous. Later, one part of the building was demolished, while another was turned into a philharmonic hall. In 1910–1938, served as a shelter for melodramas and pantomimes. After the war, it was turned into a dance hall. In 1996 the building was restored and reconverted into a theatre for large scale musicals or operas.

[25] Vincent Sternroyd (1857–1948) – theatre and movie actor. Sternroyd acted in London in 1892, and 1895–99 and 1903–1905 with Irving. He played in David Garrick (1913; director Leedham Bantock), Leah Kleschna (1913, J. Searle Dawley), The Street Singers (1914; Wilfred North, Wally Van), The Price of Things (1930, Elinor Glyn), The Howard Case (1936, Fraser Foulsham, Frank Richardson), The Marriage of Corbal (1936, Carl Grune).

[26] 1887–1888.

[27] Measure for Measure with Sternroyd as Lucio had the premiere on 7th October 1887 at Denver.

[28] Mucho Ado About Nothing with Sternroyd as Claudio premiered on 11th November 1887 at Chicago.

[29] Anna Northend Benjamin (1874–1902) – journalist. She was a war correspondent during the Spanish–American War, Cuba rebels, Boxer Rebellion.

[30] New York Tribune, Leslie's Magazine (Frank Leslie's Popular Monthly).

[31] Alice Ellen Terry (1847–1928) – English stage actress. In 1878 she joined to Henry's Irving company as a leading lady and she became a main Shakespearean actress in Britain. Her most popular roles were Portia (The Merchant of Venice) and Beatrice (Much Ado about Nothing). In 1903 Terry took over management of Imperial Theatre (London) where she performed most of all plays of Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw.